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COTTON MATHER AND THE JEWS.

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COTTON MATHER AND THE JEWS.

BY LEE M. FRIEDMAN, A. B., LL. B.

Attention has already been called to Cotton Mather's attempt to convert to Christianity a Jew named Frasier by some "pretended vision."¹

The ambition to be the means of converting a Jew to Christianity was so near an obsession on the part of Cotton Mather that it is easily possible to understand how he overstepped the bounds of propriety when one realizes the Puritan viewpoint. Even though they did not go to the full lengths of the Fifth Monarchy Men, the Millenarians or the Judaisers, to the Puritan settlers of America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the millenium was something very near and real which every day brought measurably nearer. To them it was possible for any living man not only to have a chance to partake in that great event but personally to hasten its coming. They accepted the words of prophecy literally that as soon as the Jews had been dispersed throughout every land of the earth, there was to be a calling of the Jewish nation and their conversion to Christianity, and then the millenium. It was a subject of active debate whether the conversion of the Jews was to be in the mass or whether individual Jews were to be converted until all had disappeared as Jews. Whichever view was adopted, to be the means of converting a Jew was not merely a matter of personal glory but another step accelerating the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

For years Mather had prayed and dreamed of a chance to convert a Jew. His *Diary* is filled with expressions of this

¹ See *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, No. 11, p. 79; *ibid.*, No. 20, p. 55; *ibid.*, No. 23, p. 80.

desire on his part so strongly stated that it is almost incomprehensible to-day. Thus, his prayer of July 18, 1696 concretely voiced his desire:

This day, from the dust, where I lay prostrate, before the Lord, I lifted up my cries: For the conversion of the Jewish Nation, and for my own having the happiness, at some time or other, to baptize a Jew, that should by my ministry, bee brought home unto the Lord.²

Cotton Mather, born at the height of New England Puritanism, personally embodied the spirit of the Puritan towards the Jew. It is said that at the age of twelve, he "entered upon his Hebrew Grammar" and

after his entrance into college he made as quick dispatch as before, mastering Hebrew perfectly.³

He claimed an exact knowledge of Hebrew⁴ and an acquaintanceship with the "Talmuds."⁵

²"Diary of Cotton Mather," in "Collections," Massachusetts Historical Society, 7th series, vol. vii, p. 64, hereinafter cited as *Diary*.

³"Life of the Very Reverend and Learned Cotton Mather, D. D., F. R. S.," by Samuel Mather, M. A., Boston, 1729, p. 4; see *Publications, supra*, No. 20, p. 65.

⁴"Besides what think you of that Law in the Scripture, Thou shalt not suffer a Witch to Live: Exod. 22.18 which Law you find afterwards more than once executed in Israel? If you would not bee soon tried with Greek and Hebrew, I would here actually perform what I now only profer; That is This: To prove out of the oldest Jewish Rabbins that the Hebrew Word here used in the Original, and out of the oldest Poets, Orators, Historians, that the Greek Word here used by the Septuagint, signifies one who does preternaturall mischiefs by the Aid of Divels." Mather-Calef Paper on Witchcraft, in "Proceedings," Massachusetts Historical Society, vol. xlvii, p. 255.

⁵"I should surprize you very much if I should proceed hereupon to Demonstrate unto you out of the Talmuds what horrible sorceries were epidemically known and used among the Jews, in those Dayes." *Ibid.*, p. 261.

Later it was said that his eldest daughter Katharine was trained by him to "read Hebrew fluently."⁶ He was firmly convinced that the millenium was very near and was to be much hastened by the immediate conversion of the Jews after their complete dispersion throughout every country of the world. Evidently, at some later period Mather was not quite so certain as to this order of events, for, under date of March 6, 1728/9, Samuel Sewall wrote to Rev. Samuel Mather:

I have one unhappiness befallen me viz^t Dr. Cotton Mather's vehemently insisting on the Conflagration, so that he seems to think there is no general calling or conversion of the Jews, or that it is already past and gone.⁷

He hoped for a very active and personal share in the conversion of the Jews, and each and every individual Jew who came within his reach was an object of special interest and missionary activity for him. His missionary zeal first bore fruit in 1699 when he published "The Faith of the Fathers,"⁸ of the conception of which he gave the following account:

April 9, 1699. This week, I attempted a further service to the name of the my Lord Jesus Christ. I considered, that when the Evangelical Elias, was to prepare the Jewish Nation, and the coming of the Messiah, he was to do it, by bringing down the Heart of the Fathers before the children. And I considered, that would not only confirm us Christians in our Faith exceedingly to see every article of it, asserted in the express words of the Old Testament, but that it would mightily convince and confound the Jewish

⁶ *Life, supra*, pp. 13-14.

⁷ "Collections," *supra*, 6th series, vol. ii, "Sewall's Letter Book," p. 263.

⁸ "The Faith of the Fathers/or/The Articles of the/True Religion/All of them Exhibited/In the Express Words of the Old Testament/Partly/To confirm those who do profess that Reli/gion of God, and his Messiah/But Chiefly/to Engage the Jewish Nation unto the Religion of their Patriarchs/And, Bring down the hearts of the Fathers unto/the children, and the Disobedient unto the Wisdom of the Just; and so, to make ready/a People prepared for the Lord."

Nation. Ye, who Knowes, what use the Lord may make of such an Essay? Wherefore, with much contrivance, I drew up a Catechism of the whole Christian Religion, and contrived the Questions to fitt the answers, whereof I brought every one out of the Old Testament. I prefaced the Catechism, with an address unto the Jewish Nation, telling them in some lively terms, that if they would but return to the faith of the Old Testament, and believe with their own Ancient and blessed Patriarchs, this was all that wee desired of them or for them. I gave this book to the Printer, and it was immediately published. Its Title is, *The Faith of the Fathers*.⁹

The little volume was dedicated to the "Jewish Nation" and with a most tactless exhortation implored them to see the error of their ways:

To the Jewish Nation:

One thing that satisfies us Christians, in the Truth of Christianity, is your obstinate aversion to that Holy Religion, our Blessed Jesus, the Author of our Faith, foretold your continuance under the circumstances now come upon you until the Ties of the Gentiles in the four monarchies, just now expiring, are expired. . . . Here is now put into your Hands an irresistible and inefragable demonstration that tho' you say, you are Jews you are not so. . . . Be amazed, O ye Rebellious and rejected People of our Great Lord Messiah. . . . Return O backsliding Israel!

The idea expounded was that if the Jews would only return to the faith of the Old Testament, they would see the errors of their ways and be converted to Christianity, which is in fact only the true, complete Jewish religion developed through Jesus. The work consisted wholly of passages of the Old Testament so arranged as to prove Jesus the Messiah of the Jews.¹⁰

Undoubtedly "The Faith of the Fathers" was inspired by Mather's acquaintance with some Boston Jew, possibly Frasier

⁹ *Diary*, part 1, p. 298.

¹⁰ The Christian religion "is in reality but the Faith of the Fathers and the religion of the Old Testament from whence the Modern Jews are fallen." See preface to the appendix, "A Relation of the Conversion of a Jew named Shalom Ben Shalomoh," note 14, *infra*.

or Frazon. At all events, as soon as the book had appeared in print he hopefully dispatched a copy of the new volume to his Jewish friend.

April 28, 1699. And whereas, I have now for divers years, employ'd much prayer for, and some discourse with, an infidel Jew in this Town; thro' a Desire to glorify my Lord Jesus Christ in the Conversion of that Infidel, if Hee please to accept mee in that Service. I this day renew'd my Request unto Heaven for it. And writing a short letter to the Jew, wherein I enclosed my, Faith of the Fathers, and, La Fedel Christiano, I sent it unto him.¹¹

Prayerfully he waited the results.

May 21, 1699. I had advice from Heaven—Yea, more than this; That I shall shortly see some Harvest of my Prayers and Pains, and the Jewish Nation also.¹²

Although he was doomed to local failure he was later able to rejoice over the report of the successful influence of his book in Carolina.

September 2, 1699. This Day, I understand by letters from Carolina, a thing that exceedingly refreshes me, a Jew there embracing the Christian faith, and my little book, *The Faith of the Fathers*, therein a special instrument of good unto him.¹³

We are, however, without further information as to this Carolina incident, who the Jew was, or whether it was mere gossip manufactured for export for the New England trade.

The following year, 1700, Cotton Mather published his second tract intended to influence the conversion of the Jews.

October 28, 1700. *American Tears upon the Ruines of the Greek Churches.* Moreover, a very charming relation of Conversion made by a Jew, one Shalom Ben Shalomoh, at his joining lately to a Congregational Church in London falling into our Hands, I foresaw many advantages to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ by Reprinting it. Wherefore, composing a preface to make the Transition agreeable, I procured this to be added as an appendix to the book of the Greek Churches.¹⁴

¹¹ *Diary, supra*, p. 300.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 315.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

The appendix was, in fact, only a reprint with omissions of a London edition of the previous year of the "conversion sermon" of an apostate Jew.¹⁵ Perhaps the inspiration of this appendix came from Sewall who sent to London and imported copies of the pamphlet.¹⁶

For some reason or other it is almost ten years before the next reference to the Jews occurs in Mather's *Diary*. This omission in his *Diary* does not mean that Mather had lost interest in the Jews during this period. The American Antiquarian Society, of Worcester, Mass., has a MS., finished December 25, 1703,¹⁷ which dealt in part with the conversion of the Jewish nation and in which he indorsed the views of his father, Increase Mather, as expressed in the latter's "Mystery of Israel's Salvation."¹⁸ A second undated MS., *Trip paradisus*, also in the possession of that society, is not unlikely to be of this period. In Chapter XI of *Trip paradisus* dealing with the national conversion of the Jews, Mather concluded that the millenium is not to come until the Jewish nation has been "brought in." As the nations bore evidences of being destroyed the Jewish people were to come into the "Happy State" as the Gentiles had done. Both these MSS. show that Mather had a considerable acquaintance with the literature of the subject.

Under date of February 12, 1710-11 he prayed:

February 12, 1710-11. Song of Jubilation. And that the Lord may be glorified in the Conversion of that poor Jew, and where I

¹⁵ "A Relation/of/The Conversion of/a Jew/named Shalom Ben Shalomoh/as himself uttered it, unto a Church/of the Lord Jesus Christ assembled/in Rose-Mary Lane London/September 29, 1699/ etc. etc. An appendix to American Tears upon the Ruines of the Greek Churches," Boston, 1701.

¹⁶ See *Publications, supra*, No. 20, p. 52.

¹⁷ *Problema Theologicum*.

¹⁸ "The Mystery of Israel's Salvation Explained and Applied, or a Discourse concerning the General Conversion of the Israelitish Nation," Boston, 1669.

was concerned now 16 or 17 years ago; and towards whom the Dispensations of Heaven have been singular and wonderful.¹⁹

Again, a little later he prayed once more:

April 11-12, 1711. Vigil—prayer. I cried unto the Lord, that I might yett see one (opportunities) and a very Rich one, in the conversion of that poor Jew, for whose conversion and salvation we have been for 6 or 7 years more than waiting on him.²⁰

Two years later he still seemed to be praying for this same Jew:

July 4-5, 1713. Vigil—prayer. For the conversion of the poor Jew, who is this Day returned once more unto New England, and who has now for 19 years together been the Subject of our Cares and Hopes, and Prayers.²¹

August 29, 1713. Prayer. For the conversion of the Jew for whom I have been so long and so much concerned! ²²

In 1716, Mather was strongly moved by reading a report of the conversion of Jewish children in Berlin.

October 15, 1716, A. D. A late and strange Impression of Grace, on the Jewish Children, in the City of Berlin: May I not improve it, and an Excitation of Piety in my flock, and sway the young people of it.²³

In a letter to John Winthrop Mather wrote on August 15, 1716, that in a letter received from "a famous German Divine" two days ago he was told of

a strange and miraculous motion from God upon the minds of the Jewish children in the City of Berlin. The little Jews, from eight to twelve years of age, fled to the Protestant ministers, that they might be initiated into Christianity. They embraced it with such rapture that when they saw the name of Jesus, in a book, they kissed it a hundred times, and shed floods of tears upon it. No methods used by their parents to reduce them are effectual; but they say to their parents, "We shall not return to you; it is time

¹⁹ *Diary*, part 2, p. 41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 233.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

for you to come over to us!" This German divine saw happy auspices in this rare occurrence.²⁴

The following year he evidently wrote an account of the incident, and requested the Master of the Grammar-School to call this to the attention of his scholars.²⁵

Shortly after this he resolved to publish his MS.:

I do accordingly give these things unto the Bookseller, under the Title, *Faith Encouraged*, a brief relation of a Strange Impression of Heaven, upon the Minds of some Jewish Children at the City of Berlin, (in the upper Saxony), and an Improvement made of so marvellous an occurrence.²⁶

The book itself made its appearance in the early part of the following year.²⁷ This tract is one of the rarest of the Mather items.²⁸

²⁴ "Collections," *supra*, Mass. Hist. Soc. Coll., 4th series, "Mather Papers," vol. viii, p. 420; see *Publications, supra*, No. 11, p. 80.

²⁵ "November 29, 1717. G. D. I would send my account of the Jewish children at Berlin unto the Master of our grammar schole, with my desire that it be readd publically unto the children in the schole, and that he made suitable Remarks thereupon unto them."

²⁶ *Diary*, part 2, p. 494, December 12, 1717.

²⁷ "My Faith Encouraged, being published in which the strange conversion of the Jewish children at Berlin is accompanied with an address unto the Jewish nation. I propose to send it unto as many of the Jews, in several Places and Countreys as I can." *Ibid.*, p. 503, January 31, 1717-8.

"Encourage some Schole-Masters, to have the story of the Jewish Children at Berlin, read in their schools, with application." *Ibid.*, p. 524, March 14, 1717-8.

²⁸ "*Faith Encouraged*. / A / Brief RELATION / of a / Strange IMPRESSION from / HEAVEN, on the Minds of some / Jewish CHILDREN / At the City of Berlin / (In the Upper Saxony) / And some REMARKS, for the Improvement of / so Marvellous an Occurrence. / — / Psal. VIII. 2. / Out of the Mouth of Babes and Sucklings. / By Cotton Mather. / BOSTON: / Printed by J. Allen, for T. Fleet, and Sold / at his Shop in Newbury Street, At the South / End, 1718.

The little pamphlet told of three young Jewish girls, Sprintz, Guttel, and Esther, daughters of Isaac Veits and Sophia Moses, Jews,

the eldest of 'em was twelve; (tho' the mother gives out she is but nine) the youngest was eight; or as the mother pretends, but six.

These precocious infants of Berlin cast off their parents and insisted, in spite of all discouragements from the Protestant minister and the efforts of a royal commission of three distinguished clergymen appointed by the King of Prussia, in embracing the Protestant religion. The story could only have been an inspiration to a generation which seriously read the remarkable infant professions of faith in the *Magnalia*. Cotton Mather not only offered this relation as a warning and inspiration to his own people, but he took occasion to address the "Jewish nation" with a pious wish that this brave example might not be lost upon them.

How is it possible to publish the Relation of the Jewish Children at Berlin, without an Address unto the Jewish Nation; and a Tender unto them of Things that should be more thought upon?

If but one Soul of all that Beloved People, should be found, and reach'd, and touch'd, by the Things to be now laid before them, it will be well worth while the Pains of these Expostulations. It may be, the same Spirit, who wrought upon the Babes at Berlin, will fall upon some of that Beloved People, while they have these Words before them. We will Prophesy over these Dry Bones, and see what the Spirit of Life will do upon them!

What considerations are there, which would mightily Convince them, that they do they know not themselves in their Infidelity; and which, Man and Brethren, Oh! that you would shew yourselves Men, and suffer them to awaken you.

That Mather was eager to meet and converse with the occasional Jews whom he came across is manifested by such entries in his *Diary* as these:

G. D. I hear of a Jew in this place. I would seek some conversation with him.²⁹

²⁹ *Diary*, part 2, p. 469, August 10, 1717.

G. D. I am this week entertained, with surprising advice, concerning the Jew, with whom and for whom we were so much concerned three and twenty years ago.³⁰

Not only this but there is evidence to suppose that he frequently preached upon the subject of converting Jews.³¹

There is every reason to suppose that he enjoyed the personal friendship of Judah Monis, and although Monis' conversion is credited almost wholly to Increase Mather, it would be strange if Cotton Mather had not been of some assistance to his father in that event. Cotton Mather's *Diary*, however, contains no mention of Monis, and records no personal triumphs with Jewish converts. So that beyond the intermittent personal contact with isolated Jews, Cotton Mather's relationship with the Jews and Jewish interests seems to have been wholly literary.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 500, January 17, 1717/8.

³¹ "His burthen certainly is almost insupportable, for he would fain have preach'd a Lecture sermon to stir up devout persons to pray for y^e conversion of y^e Jews." Supposed letter from Rev. Cotton Mather sent anonymously to Judge Sewall, April 13, 1720: "Collections," *supra*, 4th series, vol. viii, p. 217.

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